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A History of Chicago

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Introduction

Chicago’s history is a story of extraordinary transformation. From a muddy portage used by Native Americans to one of the world’s largest and most dynamic cities, Chicago’s rise has been shaped by geography, ambition, innovation, tragedy, and resilience. In tracing Chicago’s journey, one uncovers not just the tale of a city, but of a nation’s frontier, its industrial might, and the persistent struggles and triumphs of diverse communities.

Long before the iconic skyline adorned with steel-and-glass towers, this place was “šikaakwa”—land of the wild onion—inhabited for centuries by Native American peoples. Its position at the confluence of waterways made it both a gathering ground and a battleground, an essential link joining far-flung cultures through trade and travel. The arrival of European explorers and traders, epitomized by figures like Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, set Chicago on a path toward becoming a crossroads not only of goods but of ideas, peoples, and histories.

This book follows the city from its humble beginnings—fur traders, marshlands, and wooden forts—through its rapid emergence as a magnet for immigrants and entrepreneurs. The cataclysmic Great Fire of 1871 stands as a defining moment, propelling a period of rebirth that gave the world the modern skyscraper and established Chicago as a laboratory for architectural and engineering innovation. Even as the city surged forward, the tension between growth and inequity, progress and dissent, shaped the tenor of daily life.

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Chicago’s identity is forged in contrast and reinvention. The city built new neighborhoods with each wave of immigrants, from Germans and Irish to Poles, Italians, and African Americans fleeing Southern oppression during the Great Migration. Industrial dynamism drew millions, but also engendered labor conflict, poverty, and sometimes violence, most famously during episodes like the Haymarket Affair and the unrest of the 1960s. Chicago’s political life became legendary—embodied in powerful mayors and the machinery of party politics, institutions that presided over both great public works and deeply contested social transformations.

Through deindustrialization and the rise of the service economy, through racial division and political firsts, Chicago has continued to adapt. The city’s challenges—crime, segregation, inequality—remain points of struggle, but so too does its capacity for renewal, exemplified in revived neighborhoods, cultural innovation, and civic ambition.

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Today, Chicago stands as a testament to the American urban experience. Its history, layered and complex, is both a source of pride and a reservoir of cautionary lessons. In the chapters that follow, the story of Chicago will unfold in all its color and contradiction: a city always changing, never finished, and eternally compelling.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Days: Native Americans and the Land of “Shikaakwa”

Before the clang of steel on stone, before the rumble of trains, before the towering structures pierced the sky, the land where Chicago now stands was defined by water and earth, a meeting point shaped by the slow dance of glaciers and the steady flow of rivers. This was a place of marsh and prairie, hardwood forest and winding waterway, teeming with life and crisscrossed by the invisible paths of trade and travel that had existed for centuries. The name given to this place by its earliest human inhabitants spoke directly to its natural character: "šikaakwa," a word from the Miami-Illinois language, meaning "wild onion" or "wild garlic." For millennia, this fertile, wetland area was the Land of the Wild Onion, a place of abundance and strategic importance.

The geography itself held the key to the region’s significance. Imagine a vast inland sea, Lake Michigan, stretching northward, its southern tip pushing against the flat landscape. Just miles inland from the lake's edge lay a subtle, almost imperceptible rise in the land – the continental divide. On one side, waters flowed eastward into Lake Michigan and eventually the Atlantic Ocean via the St. Lawrence River. On the other, they flowed westward, initially into the Des Plaines River, which joined the Kankakee River to form the Illinois River, a major tributary of the mighty Mississippi River, leading ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. This narrow strip of relatively low, often marshy ground between the Chicago River (flowing into Lake Michigan) and the Des Plaines River was the magic ingredient, the linchpin of a vast North American waterborne network.

This was the Chicago Portage, a natural marvel that connected two immense hydrological systems. In wet seasons, the shallow waters of the Chicago River's south branch could actually merge with the headwaters of the Des Plaines, allowing canoes to pass directly from one watershed to the other with minimal effort. More often, it required a short, manageable overland haul – a portage – typically just a few miles, depending on the exact route and water levels. For peoples who relied on canoes and waterways for transportation and trade, this portage was like a golden gate, opening up routes from the Great Lakes deep into the heart of the continent.

For countless generations, indigenous peoples knew and utilized this crucial connection. Archaeological evidence suggests human presence in the area dating back thousands of years. While tribes moved and territories shifted over time, the fundamental importance of the portage remained constant. It was a highway of sorts, linking the peoples of the Great Lakes region – the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa

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(Ottawa), Potawatomi, and others – with tribes inhabiting the Illinois River valley and beyond, such as the Miami, Illinois, Sauk, and Fox. Goods, ideas, and cultures flowed through this narrow bottleneck.

What kind of life did these early inhabitants lead in the Land of the Wild Onion? Their existence was deeply intertwined with the rhythm of the seasons and the bounty of the local environment. The wetlands provided abundant fish and waterfowl. The prairies offered bison and other game, as well as edible plants and materials for shelter and tools. The nearby oak savannas and forests were home to deer and provided nuts, berries, and timber. And, of course, there were the "šikaakwa" – the wild onions and leeks – pushing up from the soil in spring, their pungent aroma filling the air, a reliable and flavorful food source.

These tribes were not static entities. They engaged in complex social structures, political alliances, and extensive trade networks long before European arrival. They navigated the rivers and lakes with sophisticated birchbark and dugout canoes, capable of carrying significant loads over long distances. The portage wasn't just a path; it was a nexus point, a place where different groups would meet, exchange goods – perhaps furs for corn, flint tools for copper ornaments – and share information. It could be a place of peaceful interaction, but its strategic value also made it a potential flashpoint for conflict between competing interests.

The Miami people, for example, were among the early inhabitants and users of the Chicago area and are credited with giving the place its descriptive name. They were a powerful confederacy whose territory once spanned parts of present-day Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Their presence in the region, along with other Algonquian-speaking tribes, underscores the dynamic nature of indigenous land use and territorial claims in the centuries leading up to European contact. These weren't empty lands awaiting discovery; they were occupied, utilized, and contested spaces.

Over time, the balance of power and presence shifted. By the late 17th century, the Potawatomi, part of the Council of Three Fires alliance with the Ojibwe and Odawa, became increasingly prominent in the area around the southern end of Lake Michigan, including the Chicago region. Their expertise in navigating the woodlands and waterways, combined with strategic alliances, allowed them to establish a significant presence and control over key trade routes like the Chicago Portage. Their relationship with the land was one of stewardship and reliance, carefully managing resources through hunting, fishing, gathering, and sometimes small-scale agriculture.

Life in the Land of the Wild Onion demanded adaptability. The flat terrain meant poor drainage, creating extensive marshes and making travel difficult on foot, especially during wet periods. Rivers frequently flooded, and biting insects were a constant companion during warmer months. Winters were harsh, requiring careful preparation and resource management. Yet, the rewards were great: a rich larder provided by

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nature and access to a continental trading system through the portage. The wild onions themselves weren't just a source of food; their prevalence likely made the location easily identifiable by their distinct smell and appearance, a natural landmark in a landscape that otherwise offered few prominent features.

The pathways leading to and from the portage were well-worn trails, carved by generations of foot traffic and the dragging of canoes. Imagine the scene: groups arriving from Lake Michigan, hauling their canoes and goods up the shallow Chicago River, then carefully traversing the portage path to the Des Plaines, or vice versa. The air might carry the scent of woodsmoke from temporary encampments, the sounds of different languages being spoken, the creak of canoes, and the general bustle of activity. This was commerce and connection happening on a grand scale, albeit one measured in paddles and portages rather than steam engines and asphalt.

The strategic value of the portage meant that controlling access to it was crucial for regional power. Tribes would sometimes vie for dominance over this route, leading to skirmishes and shifting alliances. The history of the Chicago area in the pre-European era is not a static picture but one of constant movement, negotiation, and adaptation among various tribal groups who recognized the unique power granted by this hydrological keyhole.

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Even the precise meaning of "šikaakwa" carries a subtle complexity. While often translated simply as "wild onion" or "wild garlic," it could refer to specific species like the native wild leek (Allium tricoccum) or wild garlic (Allium canadense), both of which would have been abundant in the moist soils of the area. These plants were not merely smelly weeds; they were valued for their medicinal properties as well as their use in flavoring food, adding a vital source of vitamins and minerals to the diet, particularly after the lean months of winter.

So, long before any map was drawn by European hands, long before the idea of a city here was conceived in a European mind, this place had a name, a purpose, and a network of human connections that radiated outwards across the continent. It was a place defined by its natural gifts – the convergence of water, the rich soil, the abundant plant and animal life – and by the indigenous peoples who understood its significance, navigated its challenges, and built their lives and trade routes around its unique geography. The Land of the Wild Onion was not an empty wilderness, but a vital, active center in the pre-colonial world of North America, a legacy that forms the bedrock of Chicago's much later emergence.

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